

## **The Joy of Medicine — “It’s a Wonderful Life”**

Keynote Speaker, Commencement Ceremony

The University of California, Davis School of Medicine, Class of 2019

Friday, May 17, 2019 — Mondavi Center, Davis, California 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

Good morning, Class of 2019, and thank you so much for your very kind invitation to share the stage with you! What an incredible moment in your lives... a truly grand reason to celebrate! And I must confide that one of my bucket list items is being crossed off today. I’ve always wanted to say that I’ve appeared on the Mondavi Stage in front of a packed and adoring crowd. And now, I have a whopper of a story that I will no doubt share with my future grandchildren... on many occasions... *Hey, I can leave out a few key details...* like the fact that the adoring crowd wasn’t *necessarily* gathering to see *me*! Yes, I can probably spare my grandkids that *minor* little detail... But I won’t delude myself *today*.... I know full well who the real stars of this show are... YOU — our amazing, newly minted medical doctors and health scholars from the Class of 2019! And if there’s one thing I want you to know, it’s this... Being with you over the past few years has filled us all with joy! Unspeakable joy! Truly. So this is what I want to focus on today — “The Joy of Medicine — Oh, a life in medicine... It’s a Wonderful Life”!

Although it wasn’t a commercial or blockbuster success when it was first released in 1946, the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life” is now recognized as an enduring Holiday classic and one of the greatest films in American cinema. It was based on a 4,000-word short story entitled “The Greatest Gift,” written in 1943 by Philip Van Doren Stern. I must acknowledge that, like all human stories, the tale depicted in these works presents a unique and very limited perspective... in this case, from a bygone era... and it certainly does not encompass the rich breadth and depth of our ever-evolving, multicultural American experience. In any event, as some of you may recall, the story unfolds on Christmas Eve as a man named George (“Jorge”) is actively contemplating suicide by jumping off a bridge into an icy river. He is suddenly interrupted by an inquisitive and mysterious stranger. A brief conversation ensues in which George admits that he is “sick of everything” in his life. He laments that he is “stuck here in this mudhole for life, doing the same dull

work day after day” while others are “leading exciting lives.” He adds, “I never did anything really useful or interesting, and it looks as if I never will. I might just as well be dead. I might better be dead. Sometimes I wish I were. In fact, I wish I’d never been born!” This immediately excites the stranger who *very strangely* announces that George has wonderfully “solved everything”... “all of [his] troubles are [now] over”... his wish has been “granted — officially.”

As the tale continues, George discovers that his seemingly miserable life had far more meaning... impact... relevance... importance... than he ever could have imagined. He discovers that life and our powerful connections to others are among the greatest and most under- or un-appreciated gifts anyone can receive. And, in pondering the timeless lessons of George’s tale, I believe it is imperative that all of us — particularly those of us who are privileged to be physicians — discover the mysteriously beautiful, miraculously intricate, and breathtakingly complex way our lives are woven together into a grand tapestry... a fantastic, living fabric that the term “work of art” cannot even begin to describe.

As I started my life in medicine, I faced many challenges. The times were different, and we hadn’t yet discovered the need for work hours restrictions or work-life balance. We never really talked about “wellness.” I was impatient with my development and I couldn’t wait to outgrow my early awkwardness and stifling mediocrity. I had been a spectacularly unspectacular medical student, and it took far too long for me to outgrow my “ugly duckling-ness.” Residency training presented me with the greatest challenges I ever faced in my personal and professional life. And I recall at least 3 separate occasions when I really, really, REALLY wanted to quit! So what kept me going? As unbelievable as this may sound to you, my medical career was saved by the surprising and perfectly timed visits of unexpected strangers... “angels” if you will....

Each “angel” found me in the midst of a painfully long season of discontent, as I struggled with extreme exhaustion, severe disillusionment, and near hopelessness.

My first seemingly random, seemingly predestined meeting came on a cold winter day during my intern year when I did NOT want to be on call. As I walked down a dark hospital corridor, aloofly brooding about my situation and struggling against the urge to hang up my stethoscope for good, I was startled by a gentle tap on my shoulder. It was my clinic patient, a non-English-speaking survivor of the Cambodian genocide's "Killing Fields." The look of unadulterated joy on his face instantly overwhelmed me, infectiously filling me with joy. Although we could not communicate with words in the absence of an interpreter, his non-verbal message to me was resoundingly clear: "You are my doctor and I am so very happy to see you! You matter to me! You make a difference in my life and I'm so thankful for you!" Fighting back tears, I tried my best to pantomime my gratitude for his presence in my life, particularly at that moment. And this miraculously-timed, unexpected visit helped me hold on for another day. In the months that followed, other "angels" made their propitious visits. One was a dapper stranger, unrecognizable at first, until he reminded me that I had been the first of many doctors who cared for him during a prolonged and complicated hospitalization. I had admitted him to the hospital after he had been found unresponsive in some bushes, covered in filth. As I marveled at his astonishing transformation, he told me that he had long hoped he'd someday run into me. He felt that he hadn't had a chance to properly thank me, and he told me he would never forget me or what I had done to help him. And this got me through another impossibly difficult, incredible day... During my last year of residency training, I was unexpectedly visited by the daughter of a man I cared for during his final days. We had many telephone conversations during her father's hospitalization, but she lived in a remote state and we had never before met in person. After her father's funeral, she unexpectedly came to the hospital, hoping to meet me and surprising me on one of my most discouraging call days. Hand delivering an exceptional handwritten note and a box of chocolates, she warmly embraced me in the ICU and thanked me for caring for her father and her family. "There aren't many doctors like you, Dr. García," she told me. Her encouragement and kindness overpowered

me, helping me outlast another of my bleakest days and reminding me of the wonderful, privileged life we can enjoy in medicine.

As I now reflect on over two decades of work as a clinical professor, I shudder to think about what would have happened if I had quit on a random, horrendously “bad day” during medical school or residency... if I had never lived a day as a UC Davis professor of internal medicine. I now know I would not have been there for patients and families who have benefited from my care. I would not have been there for medical students and residents who also needed my care. And I would not have been there for scores of pre-medical students who needed a mentor and role model, and who were aching... hungry... starving for some words of encouragement to continue their journey to medical school and other health care careers.

Throughout my life in medicine... in the midst of struggle... through great trials and tribulations that nearly extinguished my joy in medicine and medical career, I have unwittingly entertained a host of “angels” whose timing was remarkably perfect — angels in the guise of mentors, colleagues, co-workers, patients, the family of patients, and... yes... now an ever-increasing number of mentees. These angels have reminded me of the truly glorious life I have enjoyed in medicine; they have firmly moored me to the bridge of academic medicine and very literally saved my life in medicine.

As you now very well know, a life in medicine is not for the faint of heart. And I cannot sugar-coat it. There are REAL struggles out there and some of them may find you. Today, we DO talk about burnout, wellness and UN-wellness, and the persistently and painfully high suicide rate among physicians and health professionals. These are VERY REAL problems, and, COLLECTIVELY, we will need to better address them. TOGETHER, we need to continue transforming our clinical, educational, and research environments into systems where the passionate pursuit of the joy of medicine is not the exception but the rule. And until we find those

“more perfect” solutions, I believe that actively searching for meaning and cultivating joy in our lives can help. Indeed, some of the greatest joys of my life have come when I have clearly seen how my past struggles have thoroughly and perfectly equipped me to help others understand, cope, and overcome the challenges they may be currently experiencing.

In closing, I need you to know that my record as a medical student was not nearly as magnificent as yours — not by a long shot! In fact, after 4 years of medical school, I embodied but a tiny fraction of the doctors and health scholars you all are today.... And yet, I somehow very humbly stand before you on this stage... as an imperfect, aging professor whose failing eyes very lucidly appreciate the intricacy with which the thread of his life has been woven into an unimaginably grand and vibrant fabric. Class of 2019, we have already witnessed the enormous impact your dazzlingly beautiful threads have had on the people around you. Your futures excite me and I simply cannot wait to celebrate the resplendent design that will continue to unfold before us.

We will all lead imperfect lives. But our lives needn't be mediocre, self-centered, lonely, or miserable. And, as Van Doren Stern's story beautifully reminds us, we cannot always know the many ways our lives touch those of others, particularly during the difficult seasons we may endure. George had to be reminded that his life was a gloriously “Wonderful Life.” And, in the midst of becoming and serving as a physician, this Jorge had to be reminded that a life in medicine is truly AN INCREDIBLY WONDERFUL LIFE. I am SO excited for you! And in the wonderful days ahead, no matter how trying they may be, please take the time to frequently remind yourselves of the marvelous and abundant wonders around you! Count your blessings! Indulge yourselves in the JOY of Medicine! Let this JOY fill you and saturate you to the marrow! And spread the JOY wherever you go! May you have a far greater impact.... and even more satisfaction and JOY in your careers than I have had in my miraculous time here at UC Davis. Congratulations, once again. We will soon exit this auditorium as fellow physicians, colleagues, and health

leaders! Thank you once again for filling our hearts with JOY... Because I hate goodbyes, I will simply say... “Live long and prosper!” As corny as it sounds, it’s what I often say to my patients when I discharge them home from the hospital — my final wish to them and to you. I’m sure our Star-Trek-loving Chancellor, Dr. Gary May, would approve. And, above all, *¡Que Dios los bendiga!* ... May God Richly Bless each and every one of you... always!